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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8261

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002948

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/20/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: TBILISI UPDATE: 11/21/07

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Opposition Leaders Share Latest Plans for Election

¶1. (C) United National Council of Opposition (UNC) members met with Ambassador November 21 to express their concerns about continuing government "oppression" of November 7 protesters, government misuse of administrative resources to campaign, and the indefinite closure of Imedi. Goga Khaindrava expressed concern that well-known independent economist Gia Khukhashvili is currently being detained by the General Prosecutor's Office because of his association with Badri Patarkatsishvili. Republican Party leader Davit Usupashvili added that he had met with Khukhashvili before and he felt there was no reason to suspect Khukhashvili has any affiliation with Russia. Khaindrava said the opposition is concerned President Saakashvili is using the government-controlled Public Broadcasting channel to paint opposition members as Russian spies (see para 3). Usupashvili accused Saakashvili of using state television, law enforcement, and the General Prosecutor's Office to systematically carry out his policies against the opposition and to directly aid his presidential campaign. Usupashvili asked for USG assistance to urge the Georgian government to stop targeting opposition members for arrest and detention. The UNC leaders were most concerned about Imedi's reopening as the opposition would be unable to run an effective campaign without access to media outside of government controlled channels. Koba Davitashvili told the Ambassador the UNC had requested permission from the government for the scheduled November 25 rally in Rike.

¶2. (C) In a separate meeting, Labor Party Presidential candidate Shalva Natelashvili shared his version of the November 7 unrest. He told the Ambassador more than half of the protesters were his supporters, who led him to Rike after the crowd in front of the Parliament was disbanded. Natelashvili said he felt he had to remain with his supporters and was not protected by his status as a political leader when he was hit with 30 teargas canisters. Natelashvili discounted rumors he had fled to Russia, saying he needed to receive medical attention and the only place he could do that was Georgia. Natelashvili said he left Tbilisi immediately after the November 7 unrest because he feared the government's "spetsnaz" planned to come to his house to kill him. Natelashvili also complained about the broadcast of two-year old footage of his "legitimate" meetings with Russian diplomats in an attempt to brand him as a Russian collaborator. Natelashvili characterized his relationship with Imedi co-owner Badri Patarkatsishvili as good, and he did not rule out Patarkatsishvili running for president.

Public Broadcasting Channel Airs Film on "Coup Plot"

13. (C) The documentary, "November to November," aired November 20 on the Georgian Public Broadcasting channel, and later on Rustavi 2 and Mze TV, outlined the government version of events leading to the November 7 unrest within the larger context of Georgian-Russian relations since the Rose Revolution. The documentary made claims the anti-government demonstrations were part of a Russian-backed coup attempt, financed by Imedi co-owner Badri Patarkatsishvili, and incited by Imedi TV. The documentary alleged the Russian Federal Security Service coordinated the demonstrations. The documentary also claimed Irakli Okruashvili was part of the plot to destabilize the government, saying Okruashvili originally planned a military mutiny on September 27, but was stopped by the government's quick counter measures. (Note: The press reported a September 27 disturbance at a military bases among soldiers who were supposedly drunk. The deputy chief of the joint staff told Embassy's Defense Attaché at the time it was simply a "disciplinary issue." Reaction to the film varied widely, with some viewers believing the film strengthened the government's position, while others felt the government looked foolish for supporting obvious propaganda. UNC leaders complained this film was another example of the government using its resources to promote their viewpoint.

Claims State Employees Pressured to Vote for Saakashvili

14. (U) Former MP for the National Movement Guguli Magradze, who was dismissed by the ruling party after taking independent stands on several issues, said state employees, including teachers, are under pressure from their employers to vote for Saakashvili. Parliamentary Speaker Nino

TBILISI 00002948 002 OF 002

Burjanadze did not rule out the possibility activists from the ruling party were doing this to "prove their loyalty to the party." She said such action was counterproductive and should be "immediately eradicated."

Burjanadze Supports European Experts on Media Bias

15. (U) Burjanadze said November 20 the Georgian authorities are working with European experts on a model to ensure Imedi TV broadcasts are unbiased. EU Special Envoy for the South Caucasus said November 16 the EU would not serve a "mediation function" but would provide experts. Nona Kandiashvili, managing director of Imedi Radio, which is shutdown along with the TV station, sought assistance from the Public Defender Sozar Subari on November 20 to resolve the situation.

Saakashvili Continues Popularity Campaign

16. (U) President Saakashvili continued his push for dialogue with the Georgian public in a meeting November 20 with World War II veterans and pensioners. During the meeting, aired live on television, Saakashvili said the Tbilisi city government would look at how to address increasing public transport fees. In a speech earlier in the day to Georgian athletes, Saakashvili said the development of a sports infrastructure was a matter of "personal prestige." Saakashvili seemed to be addressing skeptics directly, saying "I am not here to win your hearts and minds ahead of polls, but I promise we will do everything to resolve any shortcomings."

Gamkrelidze Statement on Elections

¶ 7. (U) In a November 20 interview on Rustavi-2, presidential candidate David Gamkrelidze said his main goal in the election was to prevent a first-round victory by Saakashvili.

He urged each candidate to "mobilize his voters to take as many votes from Saakashvili as possible." Gamkrelidze said he would withdraw from the elections in favor of the opposition candidate who won the majority of votes in the first-round, and he urged other candidates to do the same.

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